German University History in Comparative Perspective: The Case of Göttingen


Hartmut Boockmann/Hermann Wellenreuther (Hrsg.), Geschichtswissenschaft in Göttingen. Eine Vorlesungsreihe (= Göttinger Universitätsschriften, Serie A: Schriften, Bd. 2), Verlag Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1987, 408 S., Ln., 58 DM.

Fritz Loos (Hrsg.), Rechtswissenschaft in Göttingen. Göttinger Juristen aus 250 Jahren (= Göttinger Universitätsschriften, Serie A: Schriften, Bd. 6), Verlag Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1987, 568 S., Ln., 74 DM.


More than any other people, the Germans can rightly be said to have invented both the modern university and the modern historical study of universities. The founding of the Georgia-Augusta University of Göttingen in 1737 makes as plausible a birth-date as any for the university as we know it (though it came to maturity only after long development). It is true the Englishman Hastings Rashdall’s great work on the medieval European universities (1895) was the first landmark of university history. But the Berlin scholar Friedrich Paulsen’s numerous writings on school and university history, which began to appear about the time of Rashdall’s book and culminated in his monumental Geschichte des gelehrten Unterrichts, really opened the whole span of the subject to modern scholarship. It is therefore doubly puzzling to an American historian that his German colleagues today devote relatively little attention to the history of their universities.

The University of Göttingen is in fact a case in point. Although only Berlin played a more critical role than Göttingen in the formation of the modern German university, there exists no satisfactory scholarly history of the Georgia Augusta. The inquiring reader’s sole resort for the institution’s history as a whole is Georg von Selle’s fifty-year-old celebratory volume, woefully deficient by present standards of scholarship. The only postwar work to have studied the University comprehensively for any substantial period of time was written by an Italian, in Italian, and remained untranslated into German for over a decade after publication! The recent celebration of the University of Göttingen’s 250th jubilee has, happily, produced

a number of books exploring its past. Even collectively, these do not remedy the lack of a general history of the Georgia Augusta. But they, and notably the four under review here, do provide a wealth of new information about that history. More to the point now, they also offer an example of the strengths and limitations of German university historiography, particularly as viewed in the light of historical scholarship on American universities published since World War II.

With the exception of Anfänge Göttinger Sozialwissenschaft, the books under review share a common form and common origin. Each is a history of a particular Göttingen faculty, composed largely of intellectual biographies of leading figures in that faculty. Each volume began as a series of lectures to mark the jubilee, delivered by several members of the faculty itself. Anfänge Göttinger Sozialwissenschaft, in contrast, consists of a series of quite disparate essays, connected only by the thinnest of threads. Certainly the reader who approaches Anfänge Göttinger Sozialwissenschaft expecting a comprehensive study of the titular subject will be disappointed. But the book does make useful, if spotty, contributions to understanding scholarly activity around the Georgia Augusta in its first century and a half. The incautious reader might conclude from this collection that the beginnings of social science at Göttingen were virtually identical with August Ludwig Schlözer, since almost a third of the volume is given over to two essays (by Richard Saage and Horst Kern, respectively) on Schlözer’s political theory and his research methodology. Schlözer also figures largely in Karl Heinrich Kaufhold and Wieland Sache’s essay on the relation of early statistical studies at Göttingen to economic and social history.

Perhaps the most original and thought-provoking article, however, is Hans-Georg Herrlitz and Hartmut Titze’s about the putative problem in the 18th and 19th centuries of an excess of (poor) students. Herrlitz and Titze explain the writings of Göttingen scholars on the subject in terms of statistical cycles of attendance. To be sure, in tracing the interrelation of educational ideology and struggle for social position, Herrlitz and Titze stray somewhat from the nominal subject of the book; but the remaining two contributions wander entirely away. Ilse Costas’s essay is a competent, if somewhat pedestrian study of the social origins of 18th-century Göttingen students. Hansjürgen Koschwitz’s Pressegeschichte einer Universitätsstadt is actually a thin description of the five journals that briefly appeared in Göttingen in the 1730s — was hardly worth publishing.

What most surprises an American reader about Anfänge Göttinger Sozialwissenschaft is how little the book actually has to do with the University that forms its ostensible unit of study. In well over half the volume, Göttingen figures only as the location where Schlözer and other statistically-minded savants happened to reside. Had they lived and taught elsewhere, this circumstance would apparently have made no difference to their work — which thus floats in odd abstraction from its actual, concrete, specific site. Necessarily, the essays on the Überfüllung problem and the social origins of students refer more immediately to the University. But even these take a rather external stance that neglects the irreducibly particular life inside the Georgia Augusta. Herrlitz and Titze are really concerned with the relation between the university as a type and the self-reproduction of the middle classes: any German university would serve the argument as well as Göttingen. Similarly, Costas’s purpose is to compare the social origins of Göttingen students with those at other universities; she is not much interested in how differences between Göttingen and other institutions in the character of students might have affected curriculum, institutional structure, or the attitudes of graduates.

The result of such externalist approaches is a thin, schematic, and necessarily artificial understanding of how the University of Göttingen actually worked. And, to the extent that historians treat other universities in the same way, scholars will never understand very deeply how universities in general affected German society and culture. For only on the basis of complex, realistic studies of particular institutions can a community of historians build a
complex, realistic picture of institutions either as a type or as a system. To say all this is not to level particular criticism at the authors of *Anfänge Göttinger Sozialwissenschaft*. Their lack of interest in the internal history of the university, as distinguished from either the writings of its faculty or its relation to the larger society, seems fairly typical of German historians. This historiographic approach is certainly mirrored in the other volumes under review. The three remaining books are similar enough in approach and content that they may usefully be considered together. All three consist largely of biographical studies of eminent members of the respective faculties, set in roughly chronological order. Sometimes the essays treat more than one figure (as do Rudolf Smend's excellent article in *Theologie in Göttingen* on J. D. Michaelis and J. G. Eichhorn, as well as Gottfried Ziegler's »Die ersten hundert Jahre Völkerrecht« in *Rechtswissenschaft* in Göttingen, which trots briskly through the careers of eight jurists). But usually the focus falls on a single scholar. The essays are typically piously respectful; as one nears the present, they tend, not unexpectedly in such volumes, to become even reverential and to partake of the character of personal memoirs.

This menu is occasionally varied by an article with an institutional or topical focus. *Rechtswissenschaft*, for instance, concludes with Harry Ebersbach's brief history of the juristic seminar at Göttingen, while *Theologie* includes a memoir by Eduard Lohse of the theology student's life in Göttingen in the late 1940s — a useful source for student attitudes and curriculums in the immediate postwar period. Not surprisingly, *Geschichtswissenschaft* in Göttingen, written by professional historians, favors such topical focus more than the two other volumes. Particularly interesting is Hartmut Boockmann's survey of curriculum, culled at forty-year intervals from the Vorlesungskataloge. One only wishes that Boockmann had gone beyond description to explain the larger contexts in which curricular change took place.

Even in *Geschichtswissenschaft*, however, the great majority of the essays deal with the scholarly work of individual professors. Hermann Wellenreuther's investigation of the paradoxical neglect at Göttingen of English and American history (in the face of the Georgia Augusta's historic Anglo-American connections and library resources) illustrates how difficult it evidently is to escape the dominance of this historiographic pattern. Wellenreuther approaches an apparently thoroughly structural problem — and initially does so with some very promising comments on the political meaning of English and American history in the German context. Yet his article devolves quickly into a series of mini-essays, each on one Göttingen historian. Hartmut Boockmann's insistence that »Universitätsgeschichte mehr ist als Wissenschaftsgeschichte« (p. 161) seems rarely to have persuaded his collaborators.

It would, however, be a serious mistake to underestimate the value of »Universitätsgeschichte wie Wissenschaftsgeschichte«. Research and teaching are, after all, the core of what happens in universities. Thorough studies of the scholarly work of individual professors, therefore, lay an important foundation for any larger understanding of the university and its social and cultural roles. From such studies the historian can infer much about, for example, the social values or political attitudes likely to be imbibed by students and carried over into their later professional lives. Likewise, one can — when intellectual biography is handled sensitively and imaginatively (as in Wolfgang Petke's study of the historian Karl Brandt in *Geschichtswissenschaft*) — begin to perceive much about the socio-political shaping of academic knowledge. (One only wishes, in the case at hand, that Petke had pursued such questions more self-consciously.)

One of the great strengths of German university history, in comparison with American, is precisely its focus on the intellectual work of the leading members of entire faculties. (Sociologically speaking, this preference perhaps reflects differing degrees of respect for academic knowledge in our two countries.) Of course, there do exist biographies of the relatively small number of really celebrated American university-based scholars — theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, jurists like Roscoe Pound, historians like Frederick Jackson Turner. But American university historians are often simply unable to learn about the scholarship and teaching of
less visible professors without doing fresh primary research in each case. For instance, there is not even a substantial article about the historian Charles Kendall Adams, one of the key figures in the development of the American research university, who introduced the seminar method into the United States (at the University of Michigan in 1871) and later served as president of Cornell University and the University of Wisconsin. The books under review here bring together much more information about the scholarship of the Göttingen faculties than American historians have available for any American university— including Harvard, Yale, Johns Hopkins, Michigan, and Berkeley. Without such data, American historians are severely handicapped in trying to reconstruct the histories of their own universities (and British historians face similar obstacles). To this extent, German university historians are to be envied.

At the same time, as Boockmann remarked, »Universitätsgeschichte mehr ist als Wissenschaftsgeschichte.« Indeed, Wissenschaftsgeschichte (like studies of the social origins of students, such as Costas’s in Anfänge Göttinger Sozialwissenschaft) is most properly regarded, not as Universitätsgeschichte, but as a prerequisite for Universitätsgeschichte.

What, after all, is a university? It is not simply a collection of scholars at work on specified topics. Nor is it merely a conglomeration of students of definable social origins. Nor is it only a set of lectures, seminars, and other such institutional arrangements. Yet it is just such atomized, static notions of the university that—consciously or not—underlie all of the works under review. All of them, to greater or less degree (and it is only fair to say that Geschichtswissenschaft in Göttingen is somewhat less liable to this charge than the three other volumes), ignore the fact that Göttingen, like all universities, was and is an interactive system—or, if one prefers a less technological metaphor, a social organism. It cannot be comprehended by considering any one or more of its parts. It can only be understood by considering the relations among them in the larger context of the social and cultural role of the institution.

This point appears almost a truism in American postwar historiography of higher education. Hugh Hawkins’s study of the modernization of Harvard University in the late 19th century, for instance, tries to understand changes in curriculum in relation to the social background of the student body, the ideology of liberal individualism, the professionalization of the faculty, and so forth. Louise Stevenson’s monograph on specialization of scholarship at Yale in roughly the same period puts similar phenomena in the very different context of an institution dedicated to preserving the ethos of Evangelical Protestantism and tries to show how this religious commitment made Wissenschaft at Yale quite different from what it was at Harvard. Both books, incidentally, are concerned with the uses which Americans made of German models—and both are seriously hampered by the paucity of scholarship on German universities, as distinguished from German university scholars or German university students.3

The formation and reproduction of the professional middle classes was obviously a crucial function of 19th- and 20th-century universities. But how can we pretend to explain this role without knowing how professors addressed issues of social duty in their lectures, how student discipline and educational obligations were dealt with within universities, how students of different social backgrounds organized and socialized themselves in institutions like Burschenschaften, how university officials provided personal models of professional roles, how...but the list is almost endless. American historians have a long way to go before

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2 Probably the nearest equivalent in terms of available useful information is Louise Stevenson’s study of Yale: Scholarly Means to Evangelical Ends, Baltimore 1986. But Stevenson covers only the period 1830–1890, and her book is really a very different sort of work, not biographically focussed.

answering such questions satisfactorily. But their work may still provide useful examples for their German colleagues, who have further yet to go.4 And consider not only the university as an institution with larger social dimensions, but Wissenschaft itself. Historians have long since abandoned the fantasies of idealism. We understand that knowledge is constituted in social, political, cultural matrices. Neither constitutional law nor dialectical theology nor East European history nor social statistics – all fields of knowledge described in these books – originated in a vacuum. It would be astonishingly provincial to pretend that the university environment provided the major influences shaping such knowledge-forms. Yet it would be blind to deny any constitutive role to the university matrix. Did commitment to Lehrfreiheit and struggles by faculties to control the appointment of professorships have no effect on conceptions of constitutionalism? Did the presence of substantial numbers of Russian students and, after World War II, Göttingen’s position on the border of the Soviet zone nurture interest in East European history? Did the founder Münchhausen’s intention to make the Georgia Augusta a training-ground for civil servants not encourage the extraordinary (and distinctly cameralist) interest in economic and social statistics at 18th-century Göttingen?

The answers to these questions are obvious. And, since the authors under consideration here are certainly no fools, they themselves often note such influences on the structure of academic knowledge.5 The problem is not any failure of intelligence, research, or perception. The obstacle, rather, is that the history of the university is not conceived as an integrated whole, set in a specific social context: and this is a weakness, not of particular historians, but of the field itself. Hence such observations remain isolated comments. They do not become elements in broader interpretations of the origin and role of universities or academic knowledge.

Indeed, reading these four volumes – like reading much recent German university history – is often frustrating precisely because the pages are strewn with insights that could, given a more systematic and more determinedly contextualizing approach to university history, become the building-blocks of a socio-cultural interpretation of the university. For instance, most of the authors of the biographical studies that make up Theologie in Göttingen note in passing that their subjects were themselves the sons of pastors or theologians. Yet no one comments on this evidently closed-corporate character of the theological faculty, its social implications for the German churches or its cultural implications for theological discourse. More than once, writers mention the appeal of Göttingen for foreign students – deliberate policy at the founding.6 (The »American Colony« in particular seems to have been both numerous and active in the first two thirds of the 19th century.) Yet no one explores how this substantial and continuing alien presence might have made Göttingen different from other German universities. The theme of cameralist influence resonates through almost all of the articles on the Georgia Augusta in its first few decades. Yet no one systematically investigates how such intentions affected the university’s unusual traits – especially its stress on research and its commitment to Lehrfreiheit – or why the university soon drifted away from its cameralist commitments.


5 Cf., e.g., Anfänge Göttinger Sozialwissenschaft, pp. 77-80; Geschichtswissenschaft in Göttingen, pp. 104-105, 322; among many other instances.

6 E.g., Anfänge Göttinger Sozialwissenschaft, p. 128; Theologie in Göttingen, pp. 72-73.

A few articles strive for a more elaborated and interconnected sort of university history. Hans-Walter Krumwiede’s study (in Theologie in Göttingen) of the conflicts between the Göttingen theological faculty and the Landeskirche, for instance, places these struggles in the dual contexts of theological development in German universities and religious politics in Hannover. But one could more easily compile a catalog of missed opportunities: Bernd Moeller’s allusions to J. L. von Mosheim’s aristocratic connections (Theologie, pp. 13 ff.); Dietrich Rauschnings’s passing references to the political context affecting G. F. von Martens’s legal teaching and to the very interesting fact that the teaching of diplomatic history originated in the Faculty of Law (Rechtswissenschaft, pp. 128, 140); the intriguing hints in Manfred Hildermeier’s article (Geschichtswissenschaft, pp. 102–21) that the field of Russian history at Göttingen may have been constructed in a kind of interplay between the Georgia Augusta’s Enlightenment cosmopolitanism and Münchhausen’s desire to attract foreigners, a mixture that would surely have stamped Russia and its history with a distinct meaning. The historiography of the University of Göttingen, as it stands, is not a matured product but a story of unrealized possibilities — and in this, I am afraid, it has much in common with the history of other German universities.

This last comment might appear a counsel of pessimism, if not downright despair. It is not. German university history enjoys extraordinary strengths. It is firmly rooted in a massive literature that details, often with biographical minuteness, the development of scholarship in many individual faculties — a historiography unmatched in the English-speaking world. It is supported by a growing number of social-historical, especially statistical, studies of student populations (and, one hopes, will soon have many similar studies of the professoriate). It can draw on an extraordinarily sophisticated German theoretical literature about the social construction of knowledge. To be sure, at present it lags behind the equivalent American or British scholarship. More than is now the case, German university historians need, specifically, to see universities as functioning wholes, to understand them in multiple social, cultural, and political contexts, both internal and external. That step can put German university history in a position to cast a brilliant light, not only on the evolution of German universities, but on German society and culture. When the Georgia Augusta celebrates its 300th anniversary, we may finally read the great comprehensive history that will be Göttingen’s lasting monument.